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Irish self-portraits: the artist in curved mirrors

Brad Kent (ed.), *The Selected Essays of Sean O'Faolain*

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Brad Kent (ed.), *The Selected Essays of Sean O'Faolain*, Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016, xlii + 516 pp. ISBN 9780773547773

1 This collection of essays by Sean O'Faolain is a welcome addition to the primary sources of contemporary Irish studies for several reasons. In particular, because the author remains relatively unexplored in comparison with some of his contemporaries. In a time when the figure of the public intellectual has returned as an ideal "in absentia," O'Faolain constitutes a model in this respect—regardless of the ideological stance the reader may have. In addition, there are several aspects of his style that have been largely unacknowledged—Kent singles out humour—, like his keen eye for the metalinguistic and the structure of language itself: there is indeed more to his essays than literary criticism and socio-political controversy.

2 Given the multiplicity of interests that O'Faolain expressed in his writings, one celebrates the alternative arrangement of the essays in a list of "suggested thematic groupings" so that readers can engage with the texts as they are printed (chronologically) or in a random sequence—*à la* Cortazar's *Hopscotch*—that allows us to trace the author's ideas on burning social questions, matters of poetics, etc. The editorial material is carefully crafted and it illuminates the text at different levels: the range of the footnotes will enable scholars, students, and discriminating readers alike to situate the meaning of the essays, for they will find biographical information on the people mentioned in the text (from world-renowned authors like Ernest Hemingway to relatively obscure figures in Irish history) as well as bibliographical references or more elaborate commentaries on passages that may well bemuse some readers—as when O'Faolain called Frankenstein an "ancient myth."

3 Indeed, many will no doubt be puzzled—perhaps shocked—by some of the remarks that punctuate the essays. In general terms, the essays on the 'Irish Question' are worth revisiting: his keen, critical stance goes beyond patriotism and 'soot-or-whitewash' interests, even when his political engagement was at its peak. But when it comes to displaying his faculties as a literary critic, O'Faolain is probably at his best, and he himself becomes dazzlingly literary. Take, for instance, the image he resorts to in order to describe Liam O'Flaherty's 'superlative' style: "It is not the *amazings* and *terrifics*, though if O'Flaherty's typewriter printed not letters but words these two words would be flattened bare by now..." Likewise, his encapsulation of Joyce's aesthetic motivation can only come from an Irishman of his kind: "[Joyce] knows what he is doing—knows that like Stephen Daedalus [*sic*.] he carries through all the squalor of life the chalice of his heart's ineffable desire for beauty." He even seems to adapt the style of his critical pieces to the author he is dealing with; for example, the resemblance to Bernard Shaw's witty, pithy style is uncanny in his coda: "Shaw is a writer of fantasies full of common-sense. The dissidence is obvious. He has never resolved it."

4 It should come as no surprise, then, that a man with such a long, changing vital experience expresses his ideas in wildly different ways over a 48-year span. After all, the man who "worked as a bomb-maker and propagandist in the IRA's war against government forces" would—several decades later—witness an Ireland where "many of the liberalising forces [he] had argued in favour of" had gained some currency while he would turn to writing "travel features for *Holiday*." Thus, when O'Faolain (in his fifties) wrote "Love Among the Irish," we can already witness not only his liberalism in a broader sense, but also how much he resented the stagnation that still gripped Ireland both socially ("Rural living conditions are enough to drive any young man of spirit to emigration or to drink") and intellectually ("the motto of the Censorship Board could be, 'If it's good, we've got it!'").

5 Whether as an invaluable starting point to discover O'Faolain or as a springboard to explore his work beyond the short stories, this volume is indispensable. If, in the author's own words, "It is after all only the philosopher and the artist who might be expected to find that language as it stands does not suffice," it is clear that O'Faolain can be considered to have been both.